

## **Inerrancy – Lessons from History (1)**

By W.L. Bredenhof

The reports for Synod 2010 are now circulating among the churches. Among these reports, one can find a Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO) – this is intended to function as the church order for a merged federation of Canadian Reformed and United Reformed churches. The PJCO contains an Introduction which provides the Biblical and confessional basis, the historical background and foundational statements for the document. In the section regarding Biblical and Confessional basis, we find the following statement: “We Reformed believers maintain that the standard for personal, public and ecclesiastical life is God’s Word, the inspired, infallible and inerrant book of Scripture.” Some concerns have been expressed not only about the status of this Introduction in general, but also about the language used in this statement, particularly the word “inerrant.”

Some have claimed that the Canadian Reformed Churches, while holding to infallibility, do not officially hold to a doctrine of inerrancy. They say that biblical inerrancy is not found in our confessions. Consequently, the Introduction to the PJCO seems to be introducing extra-confessional binding. Through the PJCO, the Canadian Reformed Churches will be committed to inerrancy, whereas we never have been before. What motivates this uneasiness about inerrancy seems to be a latitudinarian impulse that wants to make or maintain room for certain controversial views.

In this series of articles, I propose to discuss the topic of inerrancy. I want to define it, explore what our confessions actually say on this topic, and most importantly look at the history of what the Christian Reformed Church has done with inerrancy in the last half century. I intend to argue that giving up the doctrine of inerrancy will inevitably result in a wrong direction. Whatever else we think about it and the merger/unity process in general, the PJCO is right to include a commitment to inerrancy.

### **Definition**

As we begin exploring this topic, it’s important that we be clear about our definitions. Since he has been so highly influential in Reformed circles, it’s appropriate that we refer to Edward J. Young. Young was one of the founders of Westminster Theological Seminary and was a professor of Old Testament there. In his excellent book, *Thy Word is Truth*, Young set out to define and defend a biblical doctrine of inerrancy.

He defined it thus: “By this word [inerrant] we mean that the Scriptures possess the quality of freedom from error. They are exempt from the liability to mistake, incapable of error. In all their teachings they are in perfect accord with the truth”(113). Young went on to write a fuller explanation of what this entails:

The Bible is inerrant. That Word which the Holy God gave to man is a Word that in all its statements is to be trusted. Upon its utterances we may fashion our lives and actions.

He who dogmatically proclaims the presence of error in the Bible has, as a matter of fact, arrogated to himself an amount of knowledge which he does not actually possess. We today are living almost two thousand years after the latest books of Scripture were written. Can we transport ourselves back to the days of Scripture and speak with such positiveness upon those days that we can infallibly point out what is error and what is not? Those who think that they can do this, often give little evidence of understanding the nature of what they are doing. As a result of further study and also as a result of archaeology much of what formerly was regarded as error has been demonstrated to be no error at all. Adverse judgments against the Bible have had to be modified, not once or twice, but over and over again. There is no other document from antiquity which for accuracy can even begin to compare with the Bible. When therefore we meet with difficulties in the Bible let us reserve judgment. If any explanation is not at hand, let us freely acknowledge that we do not know all things, that we do not know the solution. Rather than hastily to proclaim the presence of error is it not part of wisdom to acknowledge our ignorance? (185)

Young's book is a must-read for anyone attempting to understand a traditional Reformed approach to the nature and authority of Scripture. It's a classic on the subject that begins where we ought to begin: with what God's Word says about itself. Referring to a variety of Scripture passages, Young makes the case for inerrancy from the Bible itself. Readers who might want to see one of the best biblical cases for inerrancy should read *Thy Word is Truth*.

### **Committed to Inerrancy**

Given the definition provided by Young, where do the Canadian Reformed Churches stand with regards to this doctrine? Historically speaking, in 1979, J. Visscher stated what he believed to be "the Reformed position" on this matter. He wrote, "What exactly is *our position* in the midst of this swirling controversy? It should be one of whole-hearted support for the doctrine of inerrancy and those who promote it. The Scriptural passages that have been mentioned, especially 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20,21; John 10:35; are quite clearly asserting that the Bible is inspired, infallible and inerrant." Visscher went on to argue that the Canadian Reformed are also committed to inerrancy because we hold to articles 5 and 7 of the Belgic Confession. We will just note here what Visscher wrote – I hope to come back to the Belgic Confession in the next instalment in this series.

Visscher's position might be dismissed as the unofficial, informal statements of one minister. However, at the present day, the Canadian Reformed Churches **are** officially and publicly committed to the doctrine of inerrancy regardless of what one might think about what Visscher wrote or even the Belgic Confession's statements on Scripture. Indeed, the Canadian Reformed Churches have already committed themselves to inerrancy by applying for and being received into membership in the North American and Presbyterian Reformed Council (NAPARC). NAPARC's constitution includes a commitment on the part of all its members to Scripture being "without error in all its parts," which is simply another way of saying "inerrant." Those who

would balk at the inclusion of inerrancy in the PJCO's Introduction should also balk at Canadian Reformed membership in NAPARC.

Is our NAPARC commitment to inerrancy a form of extra-confessional binding? It might be, depending on your view of what the Belgic Confession says. Even if it is, as I've pointed out before, we already have extra-confessional binding in the Canadian Reformed Churches on a number of issues (e.g. homosexual marriage) – and there's nothing wrong with that. We're not only bound to the confessions but also, and more importantly, to Scripture.

Next time, we will briefly look at the Belgic Confession and whether it contains a doctrine of inerrancy.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Note:** J. Visscher's two articles on inerrancy appeared in the October 20, 1979 and November 3, 1979 issues of *Clarion*.

## **Inerrancy – Lessons from History (2)**

By W.L. Bredenhof

In the first instalment in this series, we noted that some concerns have been expressed about the Introduction to the Proposed Joint Church Order stating a commitment to biblical inerrancy. With the help of E.J. Young and his book *Thy Word is Truth*, we saw that inerrancy means "that the Scriptures possess the quality of freedom from error. They are exempt from the liability to mistake, incapable of error. In all their teachings they are in perfect accord with the truth." We also saw that by virtue of membership in the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC), the Canadian Reformed Churches have explicitly and officially committed themselves to biblical inerrancy.

As we continue our look at this doctrine and its place in our history, we need to give some attention to the Belgic Confession. Last time, we noted a 1979 article by J. Visscher that claimed that articles 5 and 7 of the Belgic Confession express a doctrine of inerrancy. However, more recently, a paper was published at the Reformed Academic blog ([reformedacademic.blogspot.com](http://reformedacademic.blogspot.com)) which argued something different. Building on a rejection of verbal plenary inspiration, one author contended that "it is best to do away with the so-called doctrine of inerrancy in favour of the traditional Reformed affirmation, as found in the Belgic Confession (Articles 5 and 7), that Holy Scripture is *authoritative* for our faith, *sufficient* for our salvation, and the *infallible* rule in regards to doctrine."

So, where does the Belgic Confession stand on this issue? We may be committed to inerrancy via membership in NAPARC, but are the Canadian Reformed Churches also confessionally committed to inerrancy?

## **The Belgic Confession and Inerrancy**

The Belgic Confession was written by Guido (Guy) de Brès and first published in 1561. Although written by de Brès, it was likely adopted by at least some of the Reformed churches in the Low Countries before its publication. De Brès used sources, the most prominent of which are Calvin's *Institutes*, the French (Gallican) Confession of 1559 and a confession written by Theodore Beza.

In the context of the Low Countries (present-day Belgium, Netherlands, parts of France and Germany), there were two main opponents to the Reformed faith. On the one hand, there was the Roman Catholic majority. The government was Roman Catholic and took a very dim view of the existence and propagation of the Reformed faith. This dim view was primarily because of the other group, the Anabaptists. While Anabaptists were never very numerous in the Low Countries, they were vocal and they had a reputation as rebels and revolutionaries. The Belgic Confession was written primarily to distinguish clearly the Reformed from the Anabaptists. These two groups are not only addressed in the Belgic Confession, but also in the two largest books of de Brès. In 1555, he wrote *Le Baston de la Foy Chrestienne* — in this work he responds to the errors of the Roman Catholics using Scripture and the church fathers. In 1565, *La racine, source et fondement des Anabaptistes* appeared, his magnum opus exposing the errors of the Anabaptists. Both works are important for this discussion because in both de Brès does not have to discuss at length the inspiration or divine origin of Scripture. He does have to debate the authority of Scripture, for both Roman Catholics and Anabaptists drew *sola Scriptura* into question. But all agreed, whether Reformed, Roman Catholic, or Anabaptist, that God had inspired the Bible and that it was infallible. For all it was a book whose trustworthiness could not be called into question.

It has been said that inerrancy is a uniquely fundamentalist doctrine that has little to do with our Reformed or Catholic (in the good sense) heritage. In his book *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, Dr. R. Scott Clark has some helpful discussion on fundamentalism. He notes that one of its distinctives was and is indeed an emphasis on biblical inerrancy. However, he goes on to note that this is not a problem for Reformed confessors:

Fundamentalists have held and practiced these [characteristics, including inerrancy], but holding and practicing them does not necessarily make one a fundamentalist. For example, something like the inerrancy of Scripture was held as an article of faith by the patristic, medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation church. Given that it was not until the Enlightenment that the truthfulness and reliability of Scripture became a crisis, it is remarkable how often premodern theologians affirmed the trustworthiness of Scripture. The Reformed doctrine of Scripture has developed in the last two centuries in order to respond to the modernist critics, but the doctrine of the Trinity underwent the same sort of development in response to the Arian critics in the fourth century. In fact, it is not a belief that the Bible is true which makes one a fundamentalist; rather it is the belief that one's interpretation of Scripture is inerrant which qualifies one as a fundamentalist. In the same way, it is hardly self-evident that calling sinners to faith in

Christ is fundamentalist unless the only alternative to modern universalism is fundamentalism. (45)

Clark is right: the medieval, Reformation and post-Reformation church all held to a form of inerrancy. However, it was not a very nuanced and detailed form of inerrancy, neither does it appear that the word “inerrancy” was per se used. All of that would only come later after the Enlightenment period saw the introduction of critical approaches to the Bible. Necessity demanded the extensive refinement and development of a doctrine of inerrancy that had hitherto been generally taken for granted and otherwise only stated in bare bones fashion.

We may conclude that Visscher was correct in 1979 to appeal to the Belgic Confession, because inerrancy is there in an incipient form. In a context of Roman Catholic religious domination, Guido de Brès was careful to make it clear that on this point the Reformed churches were in line with late medieval theology. Thus, article 4 asserts that “nothing can be alleged” against the canonical books of the Bible. No one can make an accusation of contradiction or error. Article 5 states that “we believe without any doubt all things contained in them.” No exceptions are made — if God says it, we accept it as the word of our Father who will never lie. To pit Scripture’s sufficiency in matters of salvation or doctrine against Scripture’s truthfulness in other matters is a false dilemma unknown to the Belgic Confession. The traditional Reformed doctrine of Scripture has always assumed at least an incipient form of inerrancy.

In the high orthodox post-Reformation period, this aspect of the Belgic Confession was formally recognized by theologians such as Johannes Hoornbeek (1617-1666). Faustus Socinus and his followers had explicitly denied biblical inerrancy. Against the Socinians, Hoornbeek argued (in his multi-volume *Socinianismus Confutatus*) that even in the apparently unimportant matters, God had preserved the divine writers free from error. Hoornbeek explicitly stated that this was not just his personal position but that of the Reformed churches and he appealed to article 5 of the Belgic Confession. This demonstrates that Visscher’s appeal to the Confession as a support for the doctrine of inerrancy is not novel or idiosyncratic. Rather, what is novel is to argue for positions similar to that of the Socinians using an appeal to our Confession. Given the history, such an effort is lacking in credibility.

In our next instalment, we’ll begin looking at the loss of biblical inerrancy in the Christian Reformed Church.

### **Inerrancy – Lessons from History (3)**

By W.L. Bredenhof

In our last instalment, we saw that the Belgic Confession contains the doctrine of inerrancy in seed form. One cannot argue against inerrancy on the basis of this creed. This time around we want to begin looking at the history of the Christian Reformed Church as it pertains to biblical inerrancy.

Any discussion of this topic inevitably has to deal with the infamous Report 44. This report was prepared for Synod 1972 and it dealt with “The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority.” It set the stage for much of what went wrong with the CRC in the following decades.

### **Origins of Report 44**

However, before we can look at Report 44, we need to consider how this report was commissioned. It is actually rather surprising that it has its origins partly in an overture from the Fruitland CRC to Classis Hamilton in 1968. The Fruitland CRC, under the leadership of Rev. Louis Praamsma (a well-known CRC conservative and father of writer Christine Farenhorst), overtured Classis Hamilton:

The Fruitland Christian Reformed Church overtures classis that it instructs its member of the board of Calvin College and Seminary to raise the question in the next meeting of the board, whether it is still advisable, and profitable to our churches, to commend the students of Calvin Seminary to continue their studies at the Free University of Amsterdam.

The Board of Trustees was dismissive of Classis Hamilton and so Fruitland overtured Synod 1968 directly asking them to appoint “a committee to study in the light of Scripture and the Creeds the teachings made public by some professors and instructors in our Dutch Reformed sister-church, of which evidence has been given in the overture of Classis Hamilton to the board of Calvin College and Seminary of Jan. 17, 1968.”

What were some of these teachings that Fruitland was concerned about in the Gereformeerde Kerken? H.M. Kuitert was teaching that Genesis 1 should be understood as speaking figuratively. He didn’t think it mattered whether Adam was a historic figure or not, but landed on the side of “not” at any rate. With regards to the New Testament, Kuitert said that one must distinguish between the “witness and the sound-board.” He wrote, “This implies the subjectivity of the witness and implies in the same breath some ‘wrapping-material’ which is not the matter itself.” In other words, we must distinguish between the message of Scripture and the means by which that message is delivered. Moreover, there were many other such teachings that were deeply concerning not only to Fruitland and Classis Hamilton, but also Classis Alberta North (which submitted a similar overture to Synod 1968). Classis Illiana also submitted an overture to Synod 1968 supporting Fruitland and Classis Hamilton.

What did Synod 1968 do with these overtures? The overture of Fruitland for a study committee was denied. The Synod didn’t think it was respectful or appropriate to investigate the teachings of men in their sister churches and it also assured Fruitland that it had full confidence in the discernment of the professors at Calvin. The overture of Classis Alberta North advocating for the expression of concern about some teachings emanating from the Netherlands was also denied. The grounds were similar, though the Synod added that “normal, official channels” should be employed to voice these concerns, such as the Inter-Church Relations Committee and the fraternal delegates.

However, Louis Praamsma and the Fruitland church didn't give up. We'll come back to them shortly.

### **The CRC and Scripture in the 60s**

Stepping back from the synodical story for a bit, we need to look at some of what was being written about Scripture in the CRC during the 1960s. It should be noted that these things were written by men who expressed loyalty to the Reformed confessions. However, as we survey some of these viewpoints, we can easily understand why Louis Praamsma and the Fruitland CRC (and others of like mind) were becoming increasingly concerned.

Rudolf Bultmann was a German theologian who attempted to "demythologize" the New Testament. Bultmann worked with a distinction between what actually happened (history) and what we believe (faith). The historical reliability of the Bible was not only called into question, but considered to be relatively unimportant. In an article in *the Reformed Journal* in September 1963, Bastiaan Van Elderen (a professor at Calvin Seminary) had expressed appreciation for Bultmann's contribution to biblical hermeneutics.

John Timmer and William La Fleur were CRC missionaries in Japan. In a July/August 1966 article in *the Reformed Journal*, Timmer and La Fleur argued that the book of Isaiah should probably be regarded as having multiple authors and having been written either during or after the Exile in Babylon, a staple position of higher critics. They argued that holding to the old position (which also happens to be the position of the New Testament) is "consonant to a large degree with the modern and Western value placed upon individual creativity." Again, I would draw your attention to the fact that these men expressed loyalty to the Three Forms of Unity. After all, there is nothing in the Three Forms that binds anyone to believe that Isaiah had only one author.

Academics also contributed to this latitudinarian drift. In the same issue of *the Reformed Journal* (July/August 1966), Peter Berkhout urged his readers to accept theistic evolution. With words that sound familiar, Berkhout wrote, "Whether we like it or not, we will have to put the old wine, the truth of Scripture, into new skins. Our young people are clamoring for it....You cannot suppress truth forever."

In 1968, the Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship invited Dr. Arnold De Graaff and Dr. Calvin Seerveld to give some lectures on "Understanding the Scriptures." These lectures were later published in a booklet with that title. There are a great many troubling statements in this booklet, but let's just take two. According to De Graaff, the Psalmist intended "to preach, and not first of all to relate historical events. Generalizing, we can say that we cannot deduce a history of Israel from the O.T., just as little as we can reconstruct the life of Jesus from the Gospels." In other words, disregard history, and concentrate on the message. He went on to insist that the creation account in Genesis is not to be taken as literally true. He explained further,

This does not imply that Genesis is irrelevant for geology or biology, on the contrary, in a very special way the creation story serves as the religious basis and directive for the Christian biologist's and geologist's theorizing. It does mean that the references to God's creating do not answer our scientific, biological or geological questions, just as little as the Bible answers the questions of the historian or the anthropologist. The Bible is just not that kind of a book. It is not a textbook for any science, not even theology! The Scriptures 'only' intend to recite God's mighty acts in Jesus Christ through Whom he created and re-created his world. And this recital is inscripturated for our edification, in order that we might take it to heart and thus find eternal life. That is how the Scriptures want to be read.

It was these sorts of positions (and many more could be cited) both in North America and in the Netherlands, that led growing numbers of people in the CRC to be concerned about the direction of their church. Despite professed loyalty to the Reformed confessions, there was a discernible latitudinarian drift, especially among the neo-Calvinistic academic community. During the 1960s, this drift manifested itself in the acceptance of higher critical views of Scripture. By necessary implication, this was also a clear rejection of biblical inerrancy.

#### **Inerrancy – Lessons from History (4)**

By W.L. Bredenhof

The Geelkerken case in the Netherlands in 1926 and its fallout gives us a clear picture of how deformation sometimes develops in Reformed churches. Dr. J.G. Geelkerken preached a sermon on Lord's Day 3 in which he drew into question whether there was a literal snake speaking in the garden in Genesis 3. Geelkerken professed loyalty to the Three Forms of Unity, but went off the reservation with these remarks. Technically, the Reformed confessions do not anywhere bind a man to believe that there was a literal snake in the garden. However, it has always been regarded as the clear teaching of Scripture. Geelkerken's case ended up at Synod Assen 1926 and he was suspended and then later deposed. The synod was correct to judge Geelkerken's views as unbiblical, but the procedure it followed set a precedent which would later be used in 1944 to suspend and depose men like Dr. K. Schilder. In classic Reformed church polity, a synod cannot suspend and depose officebearers. A good intention in 1926 was co-opted for an evil consequence in 1944.

A similar pattern manifested itself in the process leading up to Report 44 in the CRC. In 1969, Fruitland made another overture to the CRC synod, an overture which also had the support of Classis Hamilton. Fruitland continued to be concerned about teachings in their Dutch sister churches, teachings that were also having an impact in the CRC. What were those teachings?

The denial of the historical existence of our first parents in paradise, the subsequent denial of original sin, the denial of the historicity of historical parts of both the Old and New Testament, the surrender to the newest form of Biblical criticism, and to the scientific dogma of evolution, all made public on both sides of the ocean, have caused



feelings of uncertainty, grief, and even distrust; it is no exception any more that ministers are labelled according to their opinions and that in the work of calling a minister a consistory first tries to be informed on his position regarding the so-called 'new theology.'

The overture contained a number of footnotes. Most of them are quotes from H.M. Kuitert, but there was also this one from Dr. G.P. Hartvelt:

Excavations have shown us that the downfall of Jericho happened more than 500 years before the entry of Israel. Nevertheless the fall of Jericho is described in the image of a radical destruction. According to the story of the Bible it is clear that something must have happened with Jericho, but the hard facts of the excavations don't tell lies. It is hardly possible to accept the results of the excavations when we can use them and to reject them when they confuse us.

Clearly at issue here was the question of biblical inerrancy. What happens when statements in Scripture conflict with "scientific facts"? According to Hartvelt and others, we resort to saying that the purpose of Scripture is not to tell us anything factual about what happened to Jericho. The "message" is more important than "history."

The Fruitland overture urged Synod 1969 "to appoint a study-committee with the task to evaluate the teachings referred to in the overture-Fruitland 1968 and to report to one of the next synods." The grounds were that such a study is necessary in view of "the pastoral task of the church" and that "such a study is in line with the request of the Gereformeerde Kerken in the Netherlands to take part in the ongoing debate on Scripture." Fruitland's second attempt was successful, and the synod found the grounds compelling enough to adopt the overture.

A conservative CRC and its pastor (and Classis Hamilton) had expressed clear concerns about what was being done with Scripture in the Netherlands and North America. Synod 1969 responded by appointing a study committee, but then proceeded to appoint men to the committee in such a way that the outcome was a foregone conclusion. As an aside, something similar happened at the last Canadian Reformed synod with regards to the issue of women's voting. The synod appointed the church at Hamilton to prepare a study, presumably knowing full well what the outcome and recommendations would be. So, this happens more often in Reformed churches.

Going back to 1969, the CRC synod appointed men to this study committee who were not known to be of the concerned persuasion. Of the seven men appointed, only one (J. Vos) didn't have a doctorate from the Free University of Amsterdam. Almost all of them were professors at Calvin Seminary or College. With Calvin already drifting in the latitudinarian direction, and with the Free University totally compromised, the outcome of this study committee would be predictable.

Fruitland's serious concerns had been co-opted to produce a report which would contribute further to the deterioration of orthodoxy within the CRC. Today we may be seeing a similar pattern in our own circles. For instance, apologetics is a good and necessary pursuit. Apologetics is a discipline which, when grounded properly on Scripture, can well serve the church of Christ and the glory of God. We need to do more in this area, and especially provide more training for our young people. However, is it perhaps being co-opted in such a way that the result might just be the latitudinarian direction of the CRC and the GKN?

For example, the Reformed Academic blog purports to have an orientation to apologetics. The goal is to especially help post-secondary students who face conflicts between faith and their studies. In itself, this is an admirable ambition. However, when authors at this blog reject verbal plenary inspiration and biblical inerrancy, we are faced with the possibility of co-option. When Reformed Academic authors propose that death existed before the fall or that humanity has primate ancestors, those familiar with the history of the CRC cannot help but think of the words of that great philosopher Yogi Berra: it's déjà vu all over again.

In the next installment, we'll continue our look at the development of Report 44 in the CRC.

### **Inerrancy – Lessons from History (5)**

By W.L. Bredenhof

In this series, we've begun looking at what Christian Reformed Church (CRC) did in the 1960s and 1970s with its doctrine of Scripture. Serious concerns had been expressed by some of the churches and so eventually, in 1969, a CRC Synod appointed a committee to study the matter. As we saw last time, the committee consisted mostly of men who had studied at the institution where these problems originated: the Free University of Amsterdam. Consequently, the concerns about the doctrine Scripture were co-opted by CRC progressives to promote a looser (or latitudinarian) view of Scripture and its authority.

### **Report 36**

After being appointed, the committee started its work in earnest. By 1971, a report had been produced for the synod of that year. Report 36 was a preliminary form of the Report 44 that would go to Synod 1972.

One of my seminary professors often told us that the Reformed way is always the "*via media*" – the middle road. Sometimes this is true, but not always. Previous CRC synods had discussed reports on Scripture. In 1961, for instance, the report entitled "Infallibility and Inspiration in the Light of Scripture and our Creeds" came down in favour of inerrancy and verbal plenary inspiration. This was more the "high view of Scripture" found with such CRC stalwarts as Louis Berkhof. Yes, there were already reasons for concern in 1961, but ten years later, with Report 36, we don't find a "high view of Scripture" at all but a view that was more "middle of the road." The tumultuous 1960s had taken their toll on the CRC.

There are at least three important things to note about Report 36.

First, Fruitland CRC had expressed a pastoral concern about concrete teachings from specific individuals. The report decided to deal with “methods and not persons.” Confrontation with particular Reformed theologians and their writings was avoided. Louis Praamsma, in an article in the November 1971 issue of *the Outlook*, expressed his disappointment that this approach was taken, thereby not really addressing the pastoral concern.

Second, we can take note of the statement, “Synod urges the churches to acknowledge that the redemptive events recorded in the Bible are presented as prophetic and kerygmatic history.” At first glance, this sounds fine. The Bible does give us the history of redemption. However, many Reformed ministers’ antennae will perk up at the mention of “kerygmatic history” because of the association of that term with liberal New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann. While the report insists that the biblical message is rooted in the historical trustworthiness of the events in Scripture, it does seem to leave the door open a crack when it says, “It is possible in certain instances to distinguish, partially at least, between an event as it actually happened and the way that event is recorded in Scripture.” Would that statement leave room for asserting that Jericho was not really destroyed as described in Scripture in Joshua 6?

Finally, Report 36 offered two formulations on biblical authority. The first was good, excellent even:

The nature of biblical authority is simply and solely that it is divine. God speaks and therefore Scripture has divine authority.

This came to be known as Formulation A. Then there was Formulation B:

The divine authority of Scripture is manifested only through its content as the saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and that therefore the authority of Scripture is always concretely embedded in its redemptive message.

These two positions are irreconcilable. One posits that Scripture has authority because it comes from God. That’s the position of the Belgic Confession in article 5, dealing with the authority of Scripture. Formulation B, however, posits that Scripture has authority because of its redemptive content. This emphasis on the redemptive purpose of Scripture might at first glance seem to reflect the concern of the Belgic Confession in article 7. However, article 7 is not dealing with the authority of Scripture, but its sufficiency.

Report 36 went to Synod 1971 and from there was sent out to the churches for their scrutiny. It was published as a booklet and the committee received much correspondence about what they had written, both positive and negative. However, it seemed clear that there was no going back to the doctrine of inerrancy mentioned in 1961.

## **Report 44**

Report 44 came late to the Christian Reformed Church in 1972. In fact, there were two overtures to Synod 1972 to postpone discussion of it because of its late arrival. They wanted more time to study it. However, for some unknown reason, the synod decided to go ahead and discuss the report, and then later adopted it.

It was claimed that Report 44 attempted to take into account some of the criticisms that had been levelled at Report 36. For instance, Formulation A and Formulation B were both affirmed as “two inseparable aspects of the Reformed view of Scripture.” Of course, that did not satisfy those who saw them as irreconcilable. With regards to the naming of specific figures, the “Introductory Observations” mentions Kuitert and Lever (their views are implicitly rejected by the report), and notes that the body of the report interacts with theologians such as Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, G. Ebeling, and E. Fuchs.

Surveying the report, one finds good statements and bad statements, but more than anything else a lack of clarity. The average regular member in the CRC would have scratched his head over most of it. Ambiguity and double-speak were characteristic. Bones were thrown to conservatives; for instance, verbal plenary inspiration was affirmed. Doors were cracked open for latitudinarians: “Synod reminds the churches of our brotherly obligation to respect such freedom of biblical interpretation as falls clearly within the bounds of our creedal forms of unity, while recognizing, of course, that in all things we are bound by the Word of God.” Or: “While the entire Scripture speaks with divine authority, this divine authority is understood concretely and specifically only when one takes account of what God said, how he spoke, to whom he spoke...” Within a year, the Calvin Seminary student publication *Stromata* published an article by a “Christian homosexual” arguing that what was true in Paul’s day is not necessarily true in ours. CRC conservatives were quick to draw the connection between Report 44 and this manner of reasoning. In their view, Report 44 had opened the door. Writing in the March 1976 issue of *The Reformed Journal*, latitudinarian Harry Boer affirmed what everyone already knew: Report 44 clearly evidenced the influence of higher criticism.

There were other serious theological problems with the report. The first point of the pastoral instruction said, “Synod calls the churches to a wholehearted recognition that Scripture, which is the saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ, addresses us with full divine authority and that this authority applies to Scripture in its total extent and in all its parts.” CRC conservatives and others objected to this formulation because in saying “**saving** revelation” it failed to acknowledge that there are also parts of Scripture that plainly accuse unbelievers (see John 5:45, 12:48-49, 2 Cor. 2:15-16). This terminology was imported into the CRC from their sister churches in the Netherlands and especially from G.C. Berkouwer.

For our purposes, there are two other noteworthy points about Report 44 and its reception in the CRC. The first has to do with an appeal to pastoral care of the youth. Speaking about the “new theology” (or “latitudinarian impulse” as we’re calling it), the report stated:

The conviction with which they speak arises from their attempt to gauge the pulsebeat of Christian living today. Their claim to a hearing is based upon their professed attempts to meet the spiritual crises especially of today's Christian youth, whose confidence in the authority of Scripture is being threatened by the eroding influences of modern science. They therefore regard the so-called "new hermeneutics" as a positive contribution to meeting the felt or unfelt, yet very real needs of the church.

Here again is another example of how Fruitland's conservative pastoral concerns were co-opted by a latitudinarian agenda. It also shows that there is nothing new under the sun. Today we continue to hear about how young Christians feel threatened by modern science and how we need to respond in some other way than by encouraging them to simply believe our Father's Word which will never lie.

Finally, Classis Pacific Northwest submitted an overture to Synod 1972 on "The New Hermeneutic." They appealed to the position adopted by the CRC in 1961, and asked the Synod to judge that the "new hermeneutic" is precluded on that basis. They provided as one of the grounds this: "Synod in 1959 adopted the Reformed Ecumenical Synod Conclusions regarding inspiration, including the conclusion that '...Scripture in its whole extent and in all its parts is the infallible and inerrant Word of God.'" From the Acts it appears that Classis Pacific Northwest's overture was not even given consideration. They adopted the recommendations of Report 44, stating that these were an answer to the Classis (and others), thereby skirting the issue of inerrancy and related matters. The CRC had left 1961 behind for good.

According to one eye-witness report, under the chairmanship of Clarence Boomsma, the synod "proceeded as a well-oiled steamroller, and objectors looked like boys trying to stop it with a slingshot." Combine that with a stacked committee, a late report, and ambiguous language and it wouldn't have taken a prophet to predict the approval of Report 44 and the CRC's continued slide away from inerrancy and a high view of Scripture. In the years to come, Report 44 would often be the appeal of many a latitudinarian in the CRC.

Next time we'll look briefly at the case of Allen Verhey.

### **Inerrancy – Lessons from History (6)**

By W.L. Bredenhof

We began this series by defining inerrancy and we saw that a form of this doctrine is found in the Belgic Confession. We've also surveyed what happened with this doctrine in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in the 1960s and '70s. Early in the 1960s, the CRC held to biblical inerrancy, but in 1972 this was left in question with the adoption of Report 44.

### **The Case of Allen Verhey**

Our story continues further into the 1970s and the case of Allen Verhey. Verhey graduated from Calvin Seminary in 1975 and was then examined by Classis Grand Rapids East on

September 28 of that year. An eyewitness report of this exam was published in the February 1976 issue of *The Outlook*:

This fall a candidate in a preliminary examination had repeatedly told us that he intended to teach people to read the Bible *critically*. Questioned about this matter he stated that he did not believe that the serpent spoke to Eve as reported in Genesis 3. Questioned further about the earthquake mentioned in Matthew 28:2, he explained that whether or not this happened was a wrong question and the earthquake in the account should be understood as an apocalyptic literary symbol of the end. Some of the results of such a view of the Bible were also apparent in views he expressed on some moral questions. His view of abortion differed from that officially expressed by the church. The command, 'Servants obey your masters' was no longer to be repeated in 1850, but the Bible taught a principle of equality under Christ which brought an end to slavery. The same principle, in his opinion, applied to the place of women in the church. Although it was plain that he held many orthodox opinions, regarding the Bible he was convinced that we cannot identify the words of biblical authors with the words of God in other times. What became apparent in the examination was that such views were held not only by him.

Despite all that, the classis still passed him and opened the way for his ordination as a minister in the CRC. That eye-witness report came from one of "the founding fathers" of the United Reformed Churches, P. Y. DeJong. His church, the Dutton CRC, decided to appeal to Classis Grand Rapids East.

The matter was not discussed until the following May, and it became clear then that the classis was paralyzed. Verhey was a member of the Neland Ave CRC, and so a delegate asked whether the church was interacting with Verhey on this matter. They insisted that Verhey "still holds to the authority of Scripture, creeds, teachings of Scripture. That is a hermeneutical problem . . . It's Report 44."

Dutton did not waste any time appealing Verhey's ordination to the next CRC Synod. There was a lengthy and heated discussion on the appeal. A minority report was prepared which proposed to sustain the appeal of Dutton. However, although this was recommended to Synod 1976, it was not voted on. The Majority Report, which proposed to reject the appeal of Dutton, was, however, adopted. The grounds boiled down to procedure. Classis Grand Rapids East had followed the correct procedure, while Dutton's concerns about Verhey had not been expressed correctly according to the CRC Church Order and Form of Subscription.

Following Synod 1976, Dutton attempted to follow the procedure mandated by the synod, and after failing to see satisfactory results, took it to the next Synod as well. Numerous churches, classes and individuals sent overtures and appeals relating to the case. The Synod decided to pass the matter over to the Neland Ave CRC, and asked them to bring a report to the next synod on Verhey's views. One conservative commentator noted that it was ridiculous to ask Verhey's church (which was on record as clearly being in favour of his views) to study his views.

As it turned out, Neland Ave appointed Verhey's pastor and a number of his friends to interact with him – with predictable results. Verhey continued to be a minister in good standing.

The Verhey case gave more clear evidence that the CRC was steering for a dangerous reef. As for Verhey, today he teaches Christian Ethics at Duke Divinity School, a United Methodist institution. At some point, he was released from the ministry in the CRC.

There is a Canadian Reformed connection to this story, because in a 1977 article in *Clarion* (later republished as chapter 2 in *Essays in Reformed Doctrine*), Dr. J. Faber interacted with Allen Verhey's attack on Harold Lindsell's doctrine of inerrancy. While he chided both Verhey and Lindsell for drawing parallels between the incarnation of Christ and the inscripturation of the Bible, Faber stated that "our place on the battlefield is over against Verhey." It was clear that Faber was more comfortable with Lindsell than Verhey. Moreover, in 1977 when the Canadian Reformed Churches issued their "Appeal to the Christian Reformed Church," the Verhey case was mentioned as giving concern "that there will be a lack of doctrinal church discipline in your own church . . ." Dr. J. Faber had also written that "Appeal," together with D. Vanderboom and W. W. J. VanOene. From the Canadian Reformed perspective, it was clear that not disciplining someone who denied and attacked inerrancy was a serious reason for concern – even if said person claimed loyalty to the Three Forms of Unity.

## **Synod 1979**

Verhey was not alone in his undermining of biblical inerrancy. In 1977, Dr. Harry Boer's book, *Above the Battle: the Bible and its Critics*, was published. Boer distinguished between infallibility and inerrancy, affirming (and redefining) the former and denying the latter. In an April 1980 article in *The Outlook*, Boer was quoted as saying, "I see no evidence in the Bible for the teaching of the inerrancy of Scripture. On the contrary, I see evidence in many places against it."

Boer's book combined with Report 44 led Classis Chicago South to submit an overture to Synod 1979 requesting reaffirmation of biblical inerrancy. The grounds were as follows:

1. Report 44 for the Synod of 1972 and its guidelines have been used to affirm that there are errors in the Bible.
2. This declaration agrees with Articles 4,5, the Belgic Confession.
3. The Synod of 1973 claims that neither Report 44 nor its guidelines raises any doubts concerning the fact that "all that Scripture says is to be believed because the author says so" (Acts of Synod 1973, Art. 32, II, B, 2, p.34).
4. This declaration is consistent with the statement of the Synod of 1959 "that Scripture in its whole extent and in all its parts is the infallible and inerrant Word of God" (Acts of Synod 1959, Art. 134, I, B, e, p.64).

Classis Illiana submitted a similar overture, offering as grounds the need for denominational clarification on this issue.

Discussion of these overtures did not take place until the last day of Synod 1979. The Synod reaffirmed the CRC's commitment to biblical inerrancy and the statements made to that effect by Synods 1959 and 1961. One might look at this and think that a major victory had been won by CRC conservatives. However, there are two mitigating factors that should dampen our enthusiasm about what happened at Synod 1979.

First, the decision was made late in the morning of the last day of the Synod. According to an eye-witness report in the August 1979 issue of *The Outlook*, many delegates were leaving throughout that morning and decisions of that day were made "in great haste." Second, the decision changed nothing in the CRC. Men like Harry Boer and Allen Verhey continued to teach what they had always been teaching and no one held them accountable. They remained ministers in good standing in the CRC.

At Synod 1981 Clayton Libolt was examined for candidacy in the CRC. The September 1981 issue of *The Outlook* reported that Libolt "maintained the *events* of the fall and resurrection but rejected many of the *details* of the *descriptions* of these events." With one exception, the Calvin Seminary faculty had endorsed Libolt. The Calvin board of trustees likewise endorsed him with a vote of 42 to 7. However, Synod 1981 denied him candidacy by a significant majority. Despite Synod 1979's reaffirmation of biblical inerrancy, it was necessary for Laurie Vanden Heuvel to write, "The time has come when consistories and school boards should no longer *assume* that applicants for positions hold to the inerrancy of Scripture. It is necessary for consistories and school boards to be more specific in their questioning." As for Clayton Libolt, he was eventually ordained as a CRC minister in 1986.

### **Inerrancy and the United Reformed Churches**

At one time, the CRC had held to inerrancy in a meaningful and sincere way. But through the 1960s and 1970s, this position was eclipsed by the import of higher critical views from the Netherlands. After Report 44 and Synod 1972, the direction of the CRC became increasingly latitudinarian. The Verhey, Boer and Libolt cases were just the tip of the iceberg. Before long, the CRC had adopted a heterodox position on women in office – a position which conservatives linked to adoption of Report 44 and the drift away from inerrancy.

All along the way there were protests, overtures, and appeals. The CRC didn't deteriorate without a fight. Men who loved the CRC fought valiantly for her. Louis Praamsma, Peter Y. De Jong, Jelle Tuininga, Henry Van der Kam, and many others did everything they could to turn the tide. However, ultimately they were not able to succeed.

The debates over the authority of Scripture and the inevitable consequences led to the formation of the first Orthodox Christian Reformed Church (OCRC) in 1979. Others would soon follow. Eventually, as CRC conservatives realized that the hegemony of Calvin Seminary played a crucial role in the deterioration of the church, Mid-America Reformed Seminary (MARS) was established as an alternative. Conservative CRC members aspiring to the ministry would study



at MARS for three years, but then would still have to do the “year of penance” at Calvin. Throughout the 1990s, many concerned CRC members and ministers would leave the CRC and form independent Reformed churches. Eventually, many of these independent churches would federate into the United Reformed Churches of North America (URCNA). In 2008, the OCRC merged with the URCNA.

It is fair to say that the URCNA owes its existence to the fact that the CRC reneged on its commitment to biblical inerrancy and adopted higher critical views in its stead. Therefore, it’s no surprise that the MARS website states that the seminary is committed to the “Holy Scriptures as the infallible and inerrant Word of God.” Westminster Seminary California is another institution that supplies many of the candidates for the URCNA and it likewise affirms biblical inerrancy. Given the history of the CRC, it should also not be surprising that the existing URC Church Order also states, “We as a federation of churches declare complete subjection and obedience to the Word of God delivered to us in the inspired, infallible and inerrant book of Holy Scripture.”

Given all this history, it should also be expected that the introduction to the Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO) going to the URC and CanRC synods in 2010 would use similar language: “We Reformed believers maintain that the standard for personal, public, and ecclesiastical life is God’s Word, the inspired, infallible, and inerrant book of Holy Scripture.” Inerrancy is naturally a point of concern for our brothers and sisters in the URCNA.

Now, as we noted earlier, there are those who say that this introduction brings in a kind of “extra-confessional binding” to the CanRC. However, as I have argued before, the notion of “no extra-confessional binding” in the CanRC is a convenient myth. The reality is that we do have extra-confessional binding. As an example, there is nothing explicit in the Three Forms of Unity to prevent me or any other minister from saying that committed homosexual relationships are within the will of God. However, both our liturgical forms and our Church Order (after revision at Synod 2007) state that marriage is a relationship between one woman and one man. That is extra-confessional binding and there is *nothing* inappropriate about that. More examples could be given. In fact, as Dr. R. C. Janssen argues in his recent dissertation (*By This Our Subscription*), we have layers of confessing in our churches and that includes things like the Church Order and our liturgical forms. Moreover, we are bound first of all to Scripture – “no extra-confessional binding” can easily become a sort of *confessionalism* where the authority of Scripture itself is undermined.

As explained at the beginning of this series, in the nature of the case, the Canadian Reformed Churches have already committed themselves to inerrancy by applying for and being received into membership in the North American and Presbyterian Reformed Council (NAPARC). NAPARC’s constitution includes a commitment on the part of all its members to Scripture being “without error in all its parts,” which is another way of saying “inerrant.” I would reiterate that this is simply the contemporary and necessary outworking of the doctrine of Scripture found in the Belgic Confession. Indeed, since we have already affirmed inerrancy at NAPARC, why should we balk at affirming inerrancy in the PJCO introduction?

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the history of the CRC instructs us on what happens when inerrancy is questioned, given lip service, and then abandoned. The URCNA exists because of this struggle. As many do, I have my questions about the possibility of a CanRC/URC merger anywhere in the near future. However, if we want to make ourselves more attractive to the URCNA, drawing inerrancy into question is certainly not a way to do it. In fact, if we were to raise questions about this doctrine, also when it comes to NAPARC we may soon find ourselves on the outside looking in.